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ABSTRACT

The study examined 41 students (24 male, 17 female) in a beginning writing course for adults. Data were collected by (1) taping four workshop sessions in which all students participated in small groups, (2) interviewing all the students, and (3) observing four students writing in the classroom. The adult writers composed in two models: the extensive, which focused on conveying a message; and the reflexive, which focused on the writer's thoughts and feelings. They composed in a three-part process: pre-writing, writing, and post-writing. They engaged in very little formal planning, and showed great willingness to rework the pieces they wrote. The writers applied assumed or explicit aesthetic standards to their own writing in selecting a topic and contemplating the product. Writers' use of language and their selections of problem-solving strategies identified them as two types: narrative writers and lyric writers. Inspecting the appended versions of a student's essay about an important person, thing, or event from her past shows that her characteristic modes of reformulation were reordering of elements and expanding. The case study suggests that any individual engaged in composing is working under the influence of forces that vary with time, place, the phase of the process, and the individual personality. (JR)

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# THE COMPOSING PROCESSES OF MATURE ADULTS

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U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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I turned on the tape player, leaned back in my chair, and heard a quiet voice say, "I feel as if I had a white dress on, but I couldn't have. The dinner was held in October and people didn't wear white after Labor Day in Binghampton, New York in 1959." Now I am not a psychologist; I am a teacher of writing and I was hearing one of my students, a thirty-year old woman, trying to get her mind around a subject she wanted to write about.

I was evesdropping on Sandra's discussion with her writing workshop because I wanted to make a case study of the processes she went through in composing in order to identify variables which might be useful in characterizing the composing processes of mature adults. Very little is known about the composing processes of any age group at this time, although since Janet Emig's 1971 study of the composing processes of twelfth graders the need for such information has been acknowledged and the possibility of getting the information has become a reality.

The virtue of Emig's study, and those that have duplicated and replicated it, is that it involved the actual viewing and recording of the composing processes of the writers being studied. Rather than just analyzing the written products of the process, rather than asking students

to try to remember what they do while composing, and rather than assuming that student writers compose in the same manner as adult professionals, Emig actually sat with the student writers as they worked, observed their behaviors, recorded their comments (and her own), and thus gained insight into what student writers do as they write.

My question then was, if I do the same kind of study with my adults, will I find the same variables to be significant? Are Emig's descriptions of the groups twelfth graders fall into appropriate for use in discussing adult behaviors? Or is it possible that there is further developmental change after the age of eighteen which will result in different characteristic behaviors in writing and different variables?

The sample for this investigation was two classes (41 students--24 male and 17 female) of the beginning writing course in Rochester Institute of Technology's College of Continuing Education. The period for data collection was September 1975 through December 1975. The primary emphasis of the study was on gathering case study data on one person from each class. Secondary emphasis was on gathering data from larger groups in the same classes. Data were gained by: 1) Taping four workshop sessions in which all students participated in groups of four or five. In these workshops the students read one another's work,

worked on their papers, and talked about what they were doing as they worked. The investigator asked to have every artifact involved in producing the paper clipped to the paper in its final form. When asked, "Do we have to have any notes or outlines?" she replied that none were required to exist but if they did exist she wanted to have them.

2) The interviewing of each student about his attitudes toward his own writing; of 29 students about their activities before beginning to write; of 19 students about their backgrounds in writing instruction.

3) The naturalistic observation of four students writing in the classroom.

The purpose of this form of data gathering is to provide a range of cross-validation of data to support the findings and thus, to add power to the suggestions for research and, particularly, for instructional directions.

GENERAL FINDINGS:

These adult writers compose in two modes, the extensive and the reflexive, in their school-sponsored writing. The extensive mode is the mode that focuses on the task of conveying a message or communication to another; the style is usually impersonal and sometimes reportorial. The reflexive mode focuses on the writer's thoughts and feelings; the style may be personal and exploratory; and the audience is usually the writer or the writer and his spouse (Emig, 1971).

Because the chief audience for reflexive writing seems to be the self, writers who make available reflexive writing to their workshops may not accept suggestions as readily as they would for extensive writing; they say, "I thought about your suggestion, but I think it's best the way it is."

The adult writers in this investigation seem to compose in a three-part process: prewriting(the thinking that goes on before pen is put to paper), writing (transcribing the experience), and post-writing (revising, rewriting, proofreading, contemplating the product). The characteristics of the three parts vary with the mode being used: reflexive writing requires a much longer pre-writing period than extensive writing; indeed, some writers had been thinking about the experiences and their responses to them for ten or twelve years (although not necessarily with an eye to writing about them all that time).

The writers in this study engage in very little formal planning; only four of the 164 essays were accompanied by

the least written plan or pre-figuring. If written planning is a part of the composing processes of these writers, it occurs as a part of the writing itself, when a first draft is written with the idea of adding to it, expanding, and re-ordering.

However, as Emig notes, the absence of a written plan should not be taken to suggest that no planning occurs. If questioned about what they are going to write immediately before writing, these adults will furnish nearly all the episodes and information they will use.

Within the writing process proper, starting to write is a far more momentous occasion for these writers than for the twelfth graders in Emig's study. Many adults experience some degree of blocking when they are asked to write without a prewriting period; the blocking may range from a slight feeling of anxiety over not having "time to think about this," to an absolute inability to engage even a simple problem like a description of the immediate environment.

Although stopping is a discernable moment in the accounts of some writers (Yeats, for example), it does not seem to be so for these adults. Though there is an awareness that a good ending is necessary, that an appropriate image or lexical element can signal the end, the issue is usually addressed as a formal one rather than a psychological or metaphysical one. Consequently, the piece is likely to be considered finished

when the writer chooses from the possible endings "one that will do."

Reformulating, revising, rewriting, and proof-reading belong the the post-writing phase because they pre-suppose a written product. The students in this study showed great willingness to rework the pieces they wrote; this willingness may be a function of high motivation for achievement in general or for grades in particular, but it is usually expressed as dissatisfaction with the piece or fear that it will be misunderstood.

Proof-reading and rewriting (the correcting of minor stylistic infelicities) seem to be the major post-writing activity of the less able writer or the writer who writes only in the extensive mode. The writer who writes in the reflexive mode as well as in the extensive is more likely to revise (e.g. shift point of view, shift register, re-organize, restructure) or to reformulate the whole piece in all its elements. Although a writer may participate in any one (or more) of these processes, it is interesting that the advice they give one another and themselves is uniform and has little relation to what the giver of the advice actually does: it is universally acknowledged that after writing "you just correct it all and move some things around." Re-ordering, really a rather uncommon practice, is recommended by one and all.

The next, and for our purposes, final stage of the

post-writing phase is contemplating the product. These writers read through the pieces at least once and sometimes as often as four or five times before putting it away. Most of this group seemed to be pleased or "fairly satisfied" with what they had written. Those who wrote in the reflexive mode were more likely to engage in lengthy contemplation and were more likely to be partially or wholly dissatisfied with what they had written. Those who wrote exclusively in the extensive mode were likely to read through once (as they proof-read) and to be satisfied or "fairly satisfied" with the piece.

AESTHETIC ISSUES

The writers in this study apply assumed or explicit aesthetic standards to their own writing in two stages of the composing process--selecting a topic (prewriting phase) and contemplating the product. The particular standards vary with the individual, of course, but groupings do occur. In selecting a topic, the writers who write only in the extensive mode are likely to choose something "clear in my mind" or a "most vivid memory"; those who compose in both the extensive and reflexive modes are likely to choose a topic on the basis of its interest for the reader or on some other criteria which implies a concern for audience (e.g., "the others were too depressing" or "it might be kind of dirty and I wouldn't want to offend anyone").

In contemplating the product the writers most often

ask, "is it correct?" ("I'll recopy it and write it all nice") and "does it say what I was thinking as I wrote?" ("I think it communicates the event clearly" or "While I was writing the paper I sensed certain feelings being put into it, but when I reread it the experience seemed to fall apart").

NARRATIVE AND LYRIC WRITERS

Developmental factors such as the writer's use of language and his selections of a problem solving strategy or strategies are involved in the writing process. Variety in the kind of and interaction of factors of this type produces distinctive kinds of writers, identified by this investigation as narrative and lyric. To summarize the characteristics and behaviors of the two:

1) Narrative: The narrative writer is likely to appear unaware of options in persona, point of view, organization, and register (registers are the varieties of language from which the user of that language makes his choices). He directs his attention toward spelling and punctuation. When given the opportunity to choose topics, he characteristically chooses to write about events that really happened or ideas he already has an opinion on. He tends to reject kernel ideas or images as subjects for writing on grounds that they are too "trivial" or too "small" or "not a very concrete idea."

The narrative writer tends to write solely in the extensive mode, does not engage in self-sponsored writing, and evaluates his own writing and the writing of others on

affective criteria only.

2) Lyric: The lyric writer employs problem solving strategies which allow him to begin with an image or a central idea and, in the pre-writing phase, connect that image to other images, people, and attitudes as a basis for his writing. The lyric writer is likely to require a longer prewriting period and is likely to express only partial satisfaction with his work. He does considerable reformulating at the phrase, sentence, paragraph, and whole essay levels. He is likely to express concern for or otherwise express an awareness of his audience. Finally, he has the ability to give stylistic and aesthetic reasons in support of his reformulations and his judgments of his writing and the writing of others.

The narrative and lyric writers are composites of general types of adult student writers. Identification of either a lyric or a narrative writer does not depend on the observation of a single behavior; rather, all the characteristics exist in varying degre s in all writers. Still, the identification of a cluster of traits in a writer can be useful in predicting future behaviors and thus can help instructors in adjusting the presentation of information and in prescribing appropriate kinds of activities.

Sandra has some trouble responding to the stimulus, "Write about a person, thing, or event from your past that is important to you." As the appendix shows, she begins on one topic ("When I was five years old") which she rejects almost immediately "because it might depress someone and it's not worth it." She chooses her topic finally by "a process of elimination--all the others were boring." She goes on to say, "the others were sort of sad things . . . this is on the brighter side." We can see operating here a kind of avoidance mechanism which keeps Sandra from having to encounter her feelings too directly. Furthermore, she knows that is what she is doing and remarks, "I remember it but I don't like to talk about it."

This desire to avoid direct confrontation with her feelings may contribute to Sandra's rhetorical coup--her decision to cast the incident she does choose to write about as a letter written by a twelve-year old. By adopting a persona, that of the person she used to be, she avoids encountering the incident in the person of her adult self. With this possibility in mind, it is interesting to note the comparative sterility of the sketch written from the adult point of view. It is also interesting to note that Sandra wrote that sterile adult sketch with great ease. She composed aloud steadily, wrote as she enunciated, and made no corrections. But she didn't like the result at all.

Sandra's change of register in casting her writing in letter form suggests that she has available, and is conscious of having available, more than one solution to her composing problem. The decision to use the letter form was a creative one; it required considering other options, too, cf Sandra's remark, "I thought about presenting the story as if I was telling it to someone . . . but that would've involved a conversation . . . an exchange . . . and since one n . . . since there wasn't one I might've changed the facts and, uh, colored the story. So I used the letter form because it was the best way to . . . I could tell the story as a twelve year-old."

Inspection of early and late versions of the essay will show that her characteristic modes of reformulation are the reordering of elements and expansions, especially right-branching ones. We can note in the "adult" sketch a higher syntactic maturity than in the letter which pretends to be written by a twelve year-old. The difference seems to be in the methods of expansion--the prose sketch expands by embedding and subordinating, while the twelve year-old's letter uses primarily co-ordinating constructions. This suggests that Sandra has a concept of a mature prose style and is able to vary her style in response to the effect wanted.

Further, Sandra's post-writing comments reveal her considering the appropriateness of the stylistic choices she has made: "I tried to write this exactly the way I would

have written when I was twelve. That's why I used some . . . the sentences like "Fine I hope" and words like "anyway" because the . . . that's the way I used to talk."

The amount of re-writing, including changes at the word, phrase, sentence, and paragraph levels, suggests that Sandra engages in a rather long post-writing phase. The lexical changes and the expansions support her statement that what she values in "good" writing is a careful use of detail.

Finally, in contemplating the piece she has written, Sandra pronounces herself "fairly satisfied," saying, "I think it communicates the event clearly." She goes on to remark on the value of the writing experience to herself: "It's fun to try and remember the details and the feelings I had then without, uh, coloring them with the attitudes I've acquired since then."

THE CASE STUDY

The virtue of the case study itself, the observation of Sandra's behaviors in composing, lies not in its pointing us to any answers of substance, but rather in its directing us toward some questions of substance. The only conclusion to be drawn legitimately from the case study is that any individual engaged in composing is working under the influence of forces that vary with time, place, the phase of the process, and the individual personality. In the wider view, however, the case study's usefulness is greater; even though the effect of the concatenation of factors on Sandra is likely to be unique to her, the identification of those factors suggests a structure within which to view the writing behaviors of other adult writers.

For example, Sandra's change of register from the voice of an adult remembering to that of a twelve-year old experiencing suggested an inquiry into the extent to which an adult writer considers options in rhetorical matters and the forces which contribute to the decisions he does make. Similarly, her elimination of one possibility on grounds that it might depress someone suggested the attempt to identify the kinds of criteria on which adults base their selection of topic.

Furthermore, Braddock et al (1963) suggest that case study is best used as a means of surveying unknown terrain and suggesting possible approaches. Thus the case study approach here has, I think, vindicated itself.

The primary purpose of this investigation was the formulation of instructional hypotheses concerning adult student writers; the secondary intent was the formulation of further research hypotheses. Some significant instructional issues follow:

1) If given the opportunity to define topic, audience, and purpose for their writing, will adult writers display conscious decisions about register?

2) Will a survey of institution-sponsored writing show that selection of a single "collegiate" register is favored?

3) Will members of some professions in contrast with members of some others (say, scientific vs. social service) exhibit distinctive choices or ranges of choice in register?

4) Will distinctive responses to the question, "what makes a good writer?" be noted between men and women, between kinds of professions, or between specific strengths and weaknesses of the individual writers?

5) Will differences in syntactic maturity (as defined by Hunt's t-units) predict whether a writer displays lyric or narrative characteristics in his composing processes?

6) Can a diligently followed system of publication or peer reception of student writing increase the narrative writer's awareness of his audience?

7) Will general writing processes of adults be determined principally by developmental factors and be changed only slightly by institutional environment?

8) Can instructor intervention in the writing and post-writing phases ("What do you think is the greatest strength of this piece?" or "Which of the pieces you have written seems best? I agree. Why do you like it best?") help the narrative writer develop aesthetic criteria for judging writing outside the affective domain?

9) Can experience in writing in the more personally involving reflexive mode be helpful in engaging narrative writers in post-writing activities other than proof-reading?

Particularly valuable research directions seem to me to include the following:

1) To date there are no developmental studies relating to the writing activity of the non-professional adult. We need to see what these writers are doing where they are doing it. Direct and extended observation is needed to identify and reach conclusions about variables related to the writer's professional environment.

2) Longitudinal studies of different personality types from the beginning of their careers might yield information about the effects of job training and job pressures on writing and the writing processes.

3) Research procedures and scope need to be defined. The case study method may accomplish this, but further studies of its usefulness should be made.

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SOURCES OF VARIABLES IN SANDRA'S COMPOSING PROCESSES

| | Spouse/Family | Work/School | Sandra | Peers |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Prewriting | Shared experience provides subjects.<br>Rehearses ideas in conversation. | Provides stimuli of assignments (mostly concepts).<br>Provides interaction with peers. | Thinks about events or ideas that interest or annoy her.<br>Make decisions on rhetorical issues. | Discuss how their experiences relate to topic. |
| Writing | Provides quiet uninterrupted time.<br>Vocabulary background. | Puts time limits on processes.<br>Provides time to write (in extensive mode).<br>Intervenes with time checks, answers to questions.<br>Teaches organization and unity.<br>Vocabulary. | Follows a mental plan.<br>Revises elements of plan as she writes.<br>Pauses to re-read at word, phrase and sentence levels.<br>Chooses imagaic and lexical elements formally and psychologically appropriate. | Unknown. |
| Post-writing | Secondary audience for self-sponsored writing.<br>Proofreads institution sponsored writing.<br>Expresses approval. | Primary audience for institution sponsored writing.<br>Judges writing for compliance with conditions of stimulus.<br>Rewards or punishes by grading.<br>Encourages revision, reformulation, and proof-reading. | Re-reads, revises, and reformulates.<br>Proof-reads.<br>Judges effectiveness.<br>Re-copies in neat final form. | Unknown. |

Appendix 1

When I was five years old, my mother was working and I went to a baby. . . no . . . stayed. . . no.

Appendix 2

When I was twelve years old, all the children in my church who played a musical instrument or sang were asked to entertain at a church dinner.

The crowd was rather noisy and no one was listening to the little performers except to giggle when one child's violin fell apart on the stage.

When my turn came I sat at the piano and went through the motions of playing but, actually, I did not touch the keys. After I got up, I got the same applause all the others received.

Appendix 3

Dear Sheila

Well, we had the dinner yesterday and it was horrid. Not the food, I suppose it was good but I didn't feel like eating The audience was noisy. They laughed, talk hooted. They didn't even look at us and we I after we all practiced so hard.

The priest was even hurt about it. It was his idea that all us kids entertain at the church dinner and after it we was over with I heard him tell Mrs. Mc Neilio Namara that the people could have shown a little more courtesy toward us.

Dennisy's Masrlinis violin fell apart during his number. The bridge gave way and Trhey/sII/Isugned. At least he got some attention.

I wore my yellow dress and my Iesnon shoes but his face got awfully red. He looked like he was crying backstage but I couldn't stop to say anything to him because I was on next.

I sat at the piano for a few minutes and looked at them hoping they'd quiet down. Then I got this idea. I was supposed to play Trhe Bis "The First Waltz" but instead of actually playing it I just went through the motions of playing it. I didn't depress the keys enough to make a sound. Maybe a plink or so came out bio by accident but it was certainly not "The Black Hawk Waltz. K/ieh I linink A few people who were seated near the stage knew what I did but the rest of the audience applauded when I finished just as if I had given a grand performance of Clair de Lune. Someone (Mrs. Parker I beleive) told my parents about in what I did. My mother was dissapointed that I'd do that but my father just grinned.

Appendix 3 (con't)

Towards the end of the dinner when Diane did her ballet everyone stopped the noise ***** a little and watched.

I After we got through playing we were supposed to walk down to a special table they had reserved for us and have dinner. We had to go one by one so some of the kids were done eating when I got there. I couldn't even talk to them. I felt like crying and I was afraid to ***** try to talk for fear I'd burst out crying in front of everyone. My face felt as hot as if I had a fever so I bet it was all red. Everyone noticed too I bet.

Mrs. McNamara tried to get me to eat something but all I could do was shake my head.

I think the little kids took it better than those of us who were 11 or older. They were laughing and talking and eating heartily.

***** I don't know why I let my mother talk me into playing here to begin with. I'll tell you one thing Sheila, I'll never play ***** at a church dinner again or anywhere else either.

Well, love to everyone, write soon and tell me about what's new with you.

Love from your cousin,
Sandy

Even the preist.

You're lucky your family moved to California last April or you'd probably have been up there last night too with your ***** violin.

Appendix 4

Dear Sheila,

How are you? Fine I hope.
Remember I told you the church was having a dinner and we kids were supposed to entertain? Well, yesterday we had the dinner and it was horrid (not the food). I supposed it was good, as usual but I didn't feel like eating.

After ***** how hard we practiced and got dressed up and worried the audience didn't even listen to us. They talked & laugh & were noisy though the whole dinner. The mikrophone was buzzing a lot so they didn't use it

Appendix 4 (con't)

like they had planned. Everyone knew this so they should have been extra quiet during the show so they could hear us. Actually they didn't even look at most of us They noticed Denny though. The bridge on his violin fell out and the strings collapsed. Everyone laughed. His face got awfully red and He looked like he was crying but I couldn't stop to say anything to him because I was on next.

I sat at the piano a few minutes and looked at them hoping they'ed quiet down. I was supposed to play "The Black Hawk Waltz" then I got this idea. Instead of actually playing it I just went through the motions. A plink or two came out of the piano but certainly not "The Black Hawk Waltz."

Appendix 5

Dear Sheila,

How are you? Fine I hope.

Remember I told you the church was having a dinner and we kids were supposed to entertain? Well yesterday we had the dinner and it was horrid. (not the food). I suppose the food was good as usual but I just didn't feel like eating.

After how hard we practiced, and got all dressed up and were nervous all month thinking about it, nobody heard us play anyway. The audience didn't even listen to us. They talked and laughed and were noisy throughout the whole dinner. The micrphone was buzzing a lot so they didn't use it for very long like they had planned to. Everyone knew this so they sould have been extra quiet so they could hear us but they weren't. Actually they didn't even look at most of us. They noticed Denny though. The bridge on his violin gave way and the strings collapsed. Everyone laughed. Denny's face got awfully red and he looked like he was crying backstage but I couldn't stop to say anything to him because I was on next.

I sat down at the piano a few minutes waiting for everyone to quiet down. I was supposed to play "The Black Hawk Waltz" but then I got this great idea. So, instead of playing it I just went trough the motions of playing it. A plink or two came out of the piano when I depressed a key too hard but it certainly was not"The Black Hawk Waltz". A few people whose tables were near the stage were aware of what I did but the rest of the audience applauded when I finished just as if I had just given a grand performance of something hard like Clair de Lune. Someone (Mrs. Parker I think) told my parents what I did. My mother was disapointed but my father just grinned.

Towards the end of the dinner when Diane did her ballet a few people looked and things quieted down a bit. I guess they like dancers better than musicians.

Anyway, after we got through playing we were supposed to walk down to a table they had reserved for us and have dinner. We had to go one by one as we finished our numbers so some of the kids were done eating when I got there. I couldn't even talk to anyone. I felt like crying and I was afraid to talk for fear I'd burst out crying in front of everyone. My face was hot as if I had a fever. I bet it was all red. Everyone noticed too I bet. Mrs. McNamara tried to get me to eat something but all I could do was shake my head.

I think the little kids took it better than we did. They ate and laughed and seemed to be having a pretty good time. I never saw such rude people in my whole life. I was so mad I felt like going out to the parking lot and letting the air out of everyone's tires. Even the priest was hurt about it. It was his idea that we kids entertain at the dinner and I heard him tell Mrs. McNamara that they could have shown a little more courtesy towards us. She Agreed.

I don't know why I let my mother talk me into playing at this affair anyway. I'll tell you one thing Sheila, I'll never play here again or any place else either.

You're lucky your family moved to California last spring or you would probably have been up there with your violin last night too.

Well, love to everyone for me. Write soon and tell me all about whats going on in sunny California.

Love from your cousin,

Sandy